DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 449 CS 007 025

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TITLE Language Experience in Luxembourg: Learning to Read in Three Languages.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the World Congress on Reading (9th, Dublin, Ireland, July 26-30, 1982).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Foreign Countries; Global Approach; Integrated Activities; *Language Experience Approach; Language Skills; *Reading Instruction; *Second Language Instruction; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Luxembourg

ABSTRACT

In Luxembourg, children learn to read in two languages beyond their native Luxemburgish. Beginning in the first grade, children start on German, and in second grade, they begin the study of French and continue to study the two languages intensively throughout the elementary school years. How do elementary school teachers approach such a formidable task as teaching in a second and third language? First, there is a commitment and an intensity to the study and practice of language. Children are actively involved in every language lesson, whether through reading, discussing, writing, role playing, or other activities. Every lesson includes language experiences in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Second, teachers use a global approach--moving from wholes to parts and then working on a synthesis. Language skills are applied as they are learned, or rather, learned as they are applied. Media, such as overhead projectors and records or tapes are much in evidence in every classroom. And, finally, there are low class enrollments with 23 or fewer students. In addition, because of the great number of foreign immigrants to the country, teachers are relying more than ever on a language experience approach, building lessons around the children's interests. These observations have implications for the teaching of reading in the United States: (1) help children find the power in language and its creative possibilities, and (2) interrelate the language arts. (HOD)

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Language Experience in Luxembourg: Learning To Read in Three Languages*

Eileen Tway

The second graders were reading a story in French. The teacher and pupils stopped from time to time for a lively discussion, also in French. I was sitting in the back of the classroom, barely able to follow the fast give and take of the dialogue, because I am not French. But, then, neither were the children in that classroom. They were Luxembourgers in the tiny Grand Duchy situated at the cross-roads of Europe, and they were learning their third language.

'How,' I thought, 'are they able to do this, when at home in the United States, we seem to be having difficulties in teaching reading in only one language and compounded difficulties in teaching non-native speakers to read?'

I had gone to Luxembourg to give a workshop at Miami University's European Center, and was immediately fascinated by a situation where children learn to read in two languages beyond their native Luxemburgish. After two workshops in Luxembourg, I was even more intrigued. 'How did the schools do it?' I wondered. My next trip was specifically planned to seek answers to that question: how?

With the help of friends at the Miami Center, I arranged to visit schools in a variety of places, old schools, new schools, schools in small towns, and schools in cities, and to visit across all grade levels, including special classes and secondary school classes. Everywhere children were immersed in language learning with an intensity that was almost feverish. In first grade, children were started on German, and in second grade, they began the study of French, and then continued studying the two languages intensively throughout the elementary school years (called primary school from grades one through six).

*A talk given at the Ninth World Congress on Reading, Dublin, Ireland, July, 1982, by Eileen Tway, Professor of Language Arts, Miami University, Ohio.

Later in high school many students took English, and only after that did they study what they call "foreign languages," such as Italian.

Since we in the United States have such debates over how to teach reading in even one language, I was eager to see how elementary teachers would approach such a formidable task as teaching reading in a second and third language. I knew why already: children in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg live in a microcosm of world cultures and need to be fluent in many languages because trade and traffic from surrounding French- and German-speaking countries are an important part of daily life.

The first thing I observed was that the teachers were teaching language in each case, not "reading" alone. I was interested to see that every lesson involved all of the language arts; reading was set in a total language context. I never saw a lesson that did not involve every one of the language arts, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

When the teachers apologized to me for using so much drill (and indeed they did practice the languages intensively), I said, "Yes, but at least you do not try to teach reading skills in isolation; you do not drill on isolated skills."

"What do you mean?" they asked.

"You always work on skills in context. The children practice skills by actually applying them in speaking, listening, writing, and reading activities. You never drill on skills alone," I explained.

The teachers were always incredulous at my explanation, as if to say, "How could anyone do that -- teach skills without using them in language situations?"

I thought, 'They are right, of course. It is always an incredible situation whenever skills are presented outside of any real context.' As proponents of a language experience approach will say, "Teaching skills in isolation is like trying to teach swimming on dry land."

The Luxembourgers' way of teaching has implications for all teachers of reading, I believe. Their situation is obviously unique to them, and

although other countries are also bilingual or trilingual, it is perhaps not feasible to take their whole approach and try to apply it to any other country's situation. Yet ideas can be adapted, and some basic assumptions about language teaching can be pertinent to other situations.

The following conditions were operating when I visited Luxembourg classrooms:

1. A commitment to language learning.
   The Luxembourgers know that they need many languages and are committed to the study of language(s).
2. Intense involvement and practice.
   Children are actively involved in every language lesson, whether through reading, discussing, writing, role playing, or other activity.
3. A Language Experience Approach.
   Every lesson includes language experiences in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
4. The learning of language; not just learning to read.
   Reading is taught in a total language context.
5. The use of a global approach to language teaching.
   Teachers move from wholes to parts and then work on a synthesis. For example, they start with a sentence or paragraph, then look at words, and finally at the sounds that make up the words. Then they see how it all fits together. Language skills are applied as they are learned, or rather, learned as they are applied.
6. The use of a variety of aids to supplement textbooks.
   Media, such as overhead projectors and records or tapes, are much in evidence in every classroom.
7. A real need for languages.
   There is a purpose for language learning. Luxembourgers live at a "crossroads" in Europe, a center of commerce.

"You see, we have to drill," the teachers say. "The children will have to be able to communicate with many different people."

8. Low class enrollments.

Classes have 23 or fewer students, according to my observations. Small enrollments may also have something to do with teaching language effectively.

There is no doubt that the teaching is effective. Sixth graders are fluent in three languages. Since Luxemburgish is a form of an older German dialect, German is the second language and is read more easily than French by children. Most children do their recreational (outside-of-school) reading in German. Yet they need to be able to read French, too, for French is the official language of the government. Also, Luxembourg is too small to have much of a publishing industry of its own, so textbooks, such as geography or math or health books, are obtained from nearby French- or German-speaking countries. This means that children are practicing French or German in all curricular areas.

At around the third grade level, classroom directions, discussions, and instruction are conducted in the language of whatever textbook is being used, instead of in the native language. In the earlier grades, Luxemburgish is the medium of communication, except, of course, in French and German classes, but later on all oral exchange in classes is expected to be in French or German. Children's magazines of the country are often printed in both German and French, as are adult newspapers and journals, with French articles or pieces interspersed among the German. It is indeed a language-intensive situation.

The keys to successful learning seem to be the interrelating of all the language arts with reading and the involvement of the learner in useful, purposeful language contexts. Fortunately, these keys are available to all teachers of reading, whether they teach in one language, or more.

Since I first visited the schools, I have returned to Luxembourg two more times, most recently in 1982. The Luxembourg teachers are having more

reading problems now because of the great number of foreign immigrants to the country, people who have different languages from Luxemburgish, German, and French and who apparently do not have the same commitment to multiple language learning that native Luxembourgers do. Yet the implications of their classroom methods are still valid for the rest of us, I believe.

In fact, in some ways the Luxembourg methods are stronger than ever now. With the addition of so many other languages in their classrooms, the teachers are relying more than ever on a language experience approach, with children using their own language for first reading and writing. Dominique Portante, of the Institut Pedagogique (a teacher training institute), says, "If you stay with the mechanics, you become a technocrat. Schools are changing from pattern drills to communicative situations." (from a talk with Eileen Tway in March, 1980)

Madame Adeline Pellegrino, the head of the national reading committee, tells of how some schools are using more literature experiences and also encouraging children to create their own books. Teachers are building lessons around the children's interests and letting children be more creative in their language applications. (letter of June, 1982)

In the United States, I believe we could consider the following implications for our own teaching of reading:

1. We could re-examine our purposes and ask what it is that we really need to accomplish. For the most part, we have only the one language, certainly a very complex one, but wonderful in its complexities. English is a versatile and powerful language. We could help children find its power and creative possibilities, and discover real purposes in language learning.
2. We could do more with interrelating the language arts. In spite of their drill, the Luxembourg teachers seem to take a natural approach to language learning, showing the

relationships and applications of the language arts.

Why not teach reading in a total language context?

Learning to read in three languages takes practice, dedication, and tremendous effort. So usually does learning to read in English, but when the purposes and benefits are clear, reading experience becomes part of a natural developmental process.

For further information about "language" approaches to teaching reading in English, see the following references:

Allen, Roach Van. Language Experiences in Communication. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976.

Hall, Mary Anne. The Language Experience Approach for Teaching Reading: A Research Perspective. 2nd edition. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1978.

Stauffer, Russell. The Language-Experience Approach to Teaching Reading. 2nd edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.